

## ASSESSMENT

# A More Complete Picture of Student Learning

Assessing student work as a photo album—not as a single snapshot—may provide a richer sense of what students have learned.

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I'm really excited to see that educators are clear about the use of formative and summative assessment. We're using formative assessment to gauge the effectiveness of our teaching and to know what our students know and have yet to learn. We're using summative assessment to evaluate student progress toward course goals and report grades.

It's important that we understand the difference and communicate it to students effectively. At my school, I hear students explaining the difference to each other, and I know that they see their formative assessments as growth opportunities. They know that they have to show mastery.

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At the same time, by naming assessments, we may be falling into a trap of being too rigid. I know that when some teachers name an assessment as summative, they might be wary of changing it to formative. Sometimes our curriculum prescribes these assessments and whether or not they're summative, and we might feel compelled to comply with that direction.

Our current assessments are geared toward reporting on mastery—often what the grade measures—rather than learning. But we could create assessments that value the learning along the way. Such a system would record not just quizzes, tests, written work, and presentations, but also exit tickets, and even conversations between student and teacher.

I think the next step in the conversation around assessment is to be more flexible and to approach assessment of student learning as a photo album or a body of evidence rather than as one or the other of two things, either formative or summative.

## **It's OK to Be Flexible**

At the moment, the terms *formative* and *summative* are used to describe the intention of the assessment. Is the intention to check in on what students have learned thus far? Is the intention to reflect on instruction and perhaps change practice? Is the intention to give meaningful feedback to students? Is the intention for students to reflect and set goals? If the answer to these questions is yes, the intention of the assessment is formative. And if the intent is to score, grade, or provide a cumulative evaluation of learning, then the assessment is more likely summative.

It's important to remember that assessments and their purpose can change. If a majority of students are not successful on an assessment that was intended as summative, educators should have the power to make that assessment formative.

And if a student performs at standard on an assessment that was originally intended as formative, educators might choose to use that assessment as summative.

Instead of being rigid, we should be able to change the purpose and use of an assessment in order to meet the needs of our students.

## **A Photo Album**

Imagine that you hired a professional photographer to document an important event in your life. Maybe it's a wedding, a trip, or a religious celebration. After the event, you reach out to that photographer, excited to see the moments that were captured. The photographer instead sends you only one photo—one photo that is supposed to capture all the important memories of the event.

We would never want just one photo of a big life event, and we shouldn't want only one assessment to record our learning journey. Assessment should be more like a photo album, capturing many moments of learning. A photo album captures pictures of people, processes, items, events, and more, just as assessment should. If we treated assessment like a photo album, we'd use a variety of moments to get a better picture of student learning.

A photo album is celebratory and powerful, and assessment should be the same.

## **A Body of Evidence**

As the teachers I work with plan units, I encourage them to not be tied down to rigid structures of assessment. Instead, they should continue to collect a variety of assessments. Students should take their own pictures, so to speak, and propose their own student-generated assessments to balance out ownership of the assessment process and products.

Consider the idea of a body of evidence. When we focus on a body of evidence, we don't have to limit ourselves to a set number of assessments. We can use a variety of assessments to report student learning, from ones that we mandate to ones mandated by our districts to ones generated by our students.

So students might have different numbers of assessments. With some students, we may need more evidence of learning than we do with other students. All students deserve a body of evidence that shows their learning. This approach honors teacher skill and judgment and helps us better know and report on what students have learned.

Here are some questions to reflect upon as we consider this approach to assessment:

- How can students generate their own assessment tasks?
- Where can I be flexible in using assessments to report on student learning?
- Can I use a variety of types of assessment to create an album of student learning?
- Can I rely on a body of evidence rather than a set number of assessments?
- How can I report on the most current data of my students?
- How should I communicate this approach to parents and students?

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